

VZCZCXRO9295
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0842/01 0791444
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 191444Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6335
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000842

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/19/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: PRT WASIT: STATUS OF SADRIST CEASEFIRE IN KUT

REF: BAGHDAD 2910

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a PRT Wasit reporting cable.

12. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Summary. In a 13 March meeting and 13-14 March phone conversations with PRT Team Leader (TL), Wasit Provincial Council Chairman Mohammad Hassan Jabir (independent) spoke at length of the political effects of IP and CF operations in al Kut, the status of the Sadrism ceasefire, and possible future courses of action for Sadrism and non-Sadrism politicians, militia and CF. Jabir cautioned that aggressive IP and CF operations that made no effort to establish their legitimacy or exclusively targeted JAM neighborhoods could play into the hands of militia, who were expert at turning public opinion in their favor. Jabir said that Sadr's 9 March announcement affirming JAM's right to self-defense was not meant to give the militia free license and would likely prompt a clarifying statement reinforcing the authority of the ceasefire. End Summary.

13. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Jabir said the 9 March Sadr Trend announcement of Jaysh al Mahdi's right to self-defense, coupled with a near-simultaneous hike in IP presence and operations in al Kut, raised the level of militia violence. He acknowledged that Sadrists perhaps had put forward the idea of self-defense to appease restless militants and stir violence, while maintaining plausible deniability. But he said recent statements from Sadrism politicians indicate that "self-defense" meant nothing more than "every human's right to self-defense." The ensuing violence has caused some panic in Sadrism political ranks and Jabir said he expects public clarification from Najaf in the coming days, accompanied by a demand that the militia hew to the original terms of the ceasefire.

14. (S//REL USA, ACGU) However, returning the genie to the bottle may be difficult, as Jabir said some militia may continue to stretch the boundaries of the ceasefire even in the face of a clear order to stand-down. This episode has revealed what Jabir described as a widening rift between Sadrism political and militia leaders. He said that the Sadrism members of the Provincial Council and the head of the al Kut OMS office took unspecified steps to arrest the violence and regain control of militia, and that several Council of Representatives members and Sadrism leaders from Najaf had been in contact with provincial Sadrism leaders on 13 and 14 March in an effort to restore calm.

15. (S//REL USA, ACGU) In a phone conversation with the PRT on 14 March, Jabir said that he spoke with unnamed Sadrism leaders in Najaf and asked for a clear definition of "self-defense." Though told that "self-defense" was not intended to widen the scope of permissible militia actions, when Jabir asked whether militia members fighting in al Kut would be cut from JAM ranks, the responses revealed disagreement within the political leadership as some

expressed sympathy for the militia. They cited three major concerns in al Kut: (1) the "behavior of SWAT commander Lt. Aziz," (2) raids by US Special Forces, and (3) the high number of detainees. When asked to remove Lt. Aziz from command, Jabir asked if the Najaf leaders could guarantee in return that JAM would stand-down fully in Kut. The leaders responded that they could guarantee that "75 percent would stop, but that they could not control the remaining 25 percent."

¶6. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Turning to recent fighting between IP/CF forces and militia in Kut, Jabir said the 4-5 March cordon and search operation in Zuwerijat neighborhood, a known-JAM stronghold, was a "good start" but missed high-level targets who fled prior to the operation. He was, however, disturbed by reports that SWAT members more aggressively searched and more frequently detained persons in households showing signs of support for Sadr, and tore down posters of Muqtada al Sadr and, worse, his father Mohammed Mohammed Sadeq al Sadr. Jabir said these actions left people with the impression that the operation targeted Sadrists. Jabir warned that this perception must be undone and avoided in the future. Toward that end, he recommended (1) spreading cordon and search operations throughout the city, including affluent neighborhoods, rather than focusing exclusively on known JAM neighborhoods, and (2) allowing local political leaders - mukhtars or council members - to accompany IP forces to calm residents and provide oversight of IP actions.

¶7. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Jabir anticipates claims that the IPs lacked evidence and/or had fabricated charges against those detained in Zuwerijat and during subsequent operations in Anwar on 11-12 March. To combat this, he said the PC had formed a committee to meet with detainees and IPs in order to

BAGHDAD 00000842 002 OF 002

substantiate and publicize the charges against them and the evidence that the detainees violated the ceasefire. In doing so, Jabir hopes to legitimize both the detentions and the operations as a whole, and fuel popular support for continued efforts to cleanse criminal elements from the neighborhoods. (Note. Jabir lives in Anwar and his house suffered damage during the airstrikes on weaponized militia vehicles. End Note).

¶8. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Jabir's overriding concern is that we do not give the militia a "chance to win the sympathy of the people." He said that most citizens in Kut approve of the recent IP operations, but warned that the Sadrists "are experts at winning the people." He said that the militia will claim that they are being persecuted, despite laying down their arms, only because they are Sadrists or JAM members. Therefore, he said, IP actions must be shown to target only those who clearly are acting outside the boundaries of the ceasefire.

¶9. (S//REL USA, ACGU) On 15 March, a CoR delegation visited Wasit and met all day with provincial leaders. Prior to the visit, Jabir invited PRT to ask questions, through him, of the Sadrists in the delegation. The delegation included Nasar Ruba'i and Falah Shenshel, both Sadrists and Majed Zamili and Abu Sudiq, ISCI and Dawa members, respectively and both from Wasit. The delegation delivered a press conference and stated that (1) the ceasefire would continue as before, and (2) any armed man in the street would be considered a criminal and "would belong to nobody." At the end of the day, Jabir requested a 16 March meeting with the PRT and CF Commander on Camp Delta.

¶10. (S//REL USA, ACGU) Comment: Sadrists remain a strong force in Wasit, likely to win a block of seats in provincial elections, and they have capitalized on seven months of tranquility during the ceasefire to improve their political stock. However, hazy ceasefire limitations, made hazier by the notion of "self-defense," have accelerated Sadrist fragmentation. The challenge to those Sadrists who would

stay the ceasefire course, limit violent JAM action, and strive for political legitimacy is to corral those advocating loosening ceasefire restrictions out of fear of continued attrition of JAM ranks by Sadrists political enemies currently in power, and IP and CF forces. Our own challenge is to engage the former and marginalize the latter. We can do this through (1) communicating to moderate Sadrists our mutual interest in marginalizing wayward, non-compliant JAM, (2) limiting targeting to those acting outside the ceasefire, thereby distinguishing criminal, non-compliant JAM from Sadrists and compliant JAM, (3) emphasizing a common interest in limiting Iranian influence, and (4) offering PRT support to moderate Sadrists seeking to do work in poor neighborhoods that are the heart of Sadrists and JAM support. End Comment.

CROCKER